



India's interests in Afghanistan since Post-Taliban Era

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Abstract: India has always been at disposition to provide assistance to war torn Afghanistan in every possible way. In keeping this agenda in mind this paper presents India's foreign policy aspirations for socio-economic development, security and peace which depends on a peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood with Afghanistan, is a road for such design. The geo-strategic location of Afghanistan provides a suitable route for India to achieve her objectives in the regional and global context. When the war on Afghanistan in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States displaced the Taliban in 2001, India moved quickly to assist in reconstruction of Afghanistan and providing financial aid. India's assistance and support to Afghanistan cover a wide range of issues to include trade, commerce and security and to ensure a stable and democratic Afghanistan. Moreover, India seeks to project itself as a dominant regional power and sees the building of stable, long-term relations with Central Asian Republics (CARs) and to counter Pakistani and Chinese influence in the region.

Key words: India, Afghanistan, Democracy, Trade and Commerce, Security.

1. Introduction.

In India's extended neighbourhood policy, Afghanistan has acquired an important place. Indian foreign policy and strategic analysts consider Afghanistan's geostrategic location as a crucial link between India and natural resource abundant Central Asian region¹. For a long time, India and Afghanistan have shared historical, commercial and cultural- relationship. However, Indian policy makers are always striving for the regeneration of the old multi-facet relationship on the one hand and eyeing on commercial and strategic interests in Afghanistan and central Asia on the other. In order to institutionalise its historical ties India signed a Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1951. Later on India accorded recognition to the government of Burhanuddin Rabbani in Kabul after the withdrawal of Soviet from Afghanistan. During Taliban rule India continued this support despite the fact that the Taliban controlled 90 per cent of Afghan territory. To check the Taliban's advance India along with Russia and Iran supported the Northern Alliance. India has maintained its consulates in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Mazar-e- Sharif and Herat and has always had a diplomatic presence in Afghanistan except for Taliban rule between 1996 and 2001.² After the fall of Taliban in 2001, India quickly unveiled a comprehensive and well-funded initiative for rebuilding Afghanistan. Almost immediately, a line of credit of \$100 million announced by Prime Minister



Vajpayee to Afghanistan for displaced Afghans, pledged one million tons of wheat and transmitted a team of doctors and technicians to establish a camp for fixing artificial limbs for amputees in December 2001. Since those early measures in 2001, India has sustained its interest in Afghanistan, having committed \$750 million and having pledged another \$450 million.³ Moreover, India proposed Afghanistan's membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2005. They also developed strategic and military cooperation against Islamic militants. During Hamid Karzai's visit to India in April 2006, both the nations signed three memorandums of understanding (MOUs) for strengthening cooperation in the fields of standardisation, rural developments and education.⁴ The Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between the two countries in 2011, provides for assistance to rebuild Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutions, technical assistance and education, to bear up investment in Afghanistan's natural resources, for Afghanistan's exports provided duty free access to the Indian market support for an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned, broad-based and inclusive process of peace and reconciliation, and advocate the need for a sustained and long-term commitment to Afghanistan by the international community. In the reconstruction of Afghanistan, India has taken a lead role and enjoys tremendous amount of goodwill in the country. For the long-terms stability of Afghanistan, India's role is seen as crucial and she realizes that a democratic, stable and prosperous Afghanistan is also in its strategic interests. The long term peace and stability in Afghanistan is in India's interest aim. To protect Indian citizens working on Afghan's reconstruction projects, New Delhi has deployed a very small contingent of its paramilitary forces in Afghanistan. As India's well-targeted aid programs since 2001 include institutional capacity building, infrastructure development, small development projects and food security assistance include ongoing deliveries of wheat to Afghanistan. Through ICCR scholarships, more than 10,000 Afghan students have studied in India with some 7,000 returning home armed with an education and technical skills, which they are using to drive Afghanistan's stabilization and development. Moreover, many Afghan government officers have been benefited from the technical capacity building programs of ITEC and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, while some 8,000 Afghan students across India are pursuing self-financed degrees in different fields. And in infrastructure projects – the building of the Afghan parliament in Kabul and the Salma Dam in Herat.⁵ However, until now, India's contribution has mainly centred on four broad areas: infrastructure projects, small and community based development projects and education, humanitarian assistance and capacity building programmes. The security affairs were largely controlled by International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and have been passed to Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) after withdrawal. In security affairs, India has a minimal role because of it strained relationship with Pakistan, which has hindered a stronger strategic and political role for India in Afghanistan. The long involvement of Islamabad in the internal affairs of Afghanistan has given it authority in deciding other external powers' involvement in Afghanistan. The other obstacle between India and Afghanistan's engagement is the absence of direct land connectivity. Peace and stability of Afghanistan lie in India's national interests. In Afghanistan, India should support all efforts towards improving the security situation and providing good governance there. It is only through sustained reconstruction and concerted socio-economic development that future stability can be assured. India will continue to provide aid and assistance to the government and the people of Afghanistan as it has been consistently doing over the past 16 years.



2. Methodology.

The present study is based on secondary data amassed from different sources. In accumulation of this data, number of sources has been used such as journals, articles, and newspaper archives. The research is also based on the referred sources – published, unpublished and electronic.

3. Objectives.

The present study provides India's positive intention to strengthen her relations with Afghanistan in developmental fronts. The current research paper is based on the following broad objectives:

1. To provide a background of India's developmental initiatives since post Taliban era in Afghanistan
2. To present the India's policy objectives in underpinning her relations with neighbouring countries particularly with Afghanistan.
3. To explore the present position of India in Afghanistan in development terms and to counter terrorism in one way or other in the area.

4. Discussions.

India's policy options:

The strategic location of Afghanistan is very important for India. Afghanistan is situated at crossroads between South Asia and Central Asia and South Asia and Middle East. In the South and Central Asian context, India is not a revisionist power as Pakistan is, but, a status quo one. Quite apart from long-standing historical ties to Afghanistan that go back many centuries, India's main interests in Afghanistan are the following:

Support for democracy:

After the defeat of Taliban in 2001, India's relationship with Afghanistan became multidimensional. India actively participated in the Bonn Conference as it charted the roadmap for transformation of the Afghanistan into a democratic state. Since then, India came in a big way to support the Afghan government and the political process in the country. To boost its relations it pursued a policy of high-level engagements with Afghanistan through extensive and wide-ranging humanitarian, financial and project assistance as well as participation in international efforts aimed at political reconciliation and economic rebuilding of the country. India is the fifth largest donor of bilateral aid to Afghanistan (behind US, Japan, UK, and Germany) and is the largest in the region. The total value of declared aid since 2001 is near about US\$ 2 billion⁶. India believes that a democratic Afghanistan is good for its strategic interests and would counter the Taliban forces in the region and it has extended its all-out support in this endeavour. To reduce Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan, India's economic assistance and support to democracy is an important step. In this regard India build new parliament building, supported election process and imparted trainings to various professions including diplomats, judges, lawyers, doctors, teachers, paramedics, women entrepreneurs, officials in various departments of Afghanistan's government, cartographers and public officials.⁷ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a speech at the 2014 BRICS Summit, once again reaffirmed India's commitment to Afghanistan in the



following words: "India will continue to assist Afghanistan in building its capacity; in governance, security and economic development." ⁸ India is the world's largest democratic country and the first with which Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2011. The thirst of India is to install democracy form of government in Afghanistan. It could not say directly that Afghanistan should come for new democracy constitution, but providing all necessary helps for their peaceful life as well as let them understand what types of government would be better than at present existing government there. Indian influence in the country is highly supported by the people of Afghanistan it is because of the fact that through most part of Indo-Afghan relations, India has been a true friend. The Afghanistan people realize the fact that India's support for Afghanistan is important and they wishing that it should keep its assistance continue until it is able to stand on its own.

Enhance ties with Central Asian Republics (CARs):

The importance of Afghanistan for India is as a gateway to the Central Asian region where it hopes to expand its influence. Afghanistan is not only vital for Central Asia where India wishes to tap for its energy security but also for other major powers such as the Russia, US, and China have already started racing for influence in the region. It shares many of the interests with these power actors such as the US, Russia and China vis-à-vis Central Asia, including access to Central Asian energy resources, ensuring political stability, controlling the spread of radical Islam, and strengthening of regional economies. To counter their growing influence in Central Asian economic and energy sectors, India is looking Afghanistan as a base. To bypass Pakistan completely, India is building a port in Chabahar in Iran which could connect to the Iranian hinterland, and thereby transport Indian goods to Afghanistan as Afghanistan is potential market for Indian goods and business.⁹ Recently, India used this new route for the first time on 29 October 2017 by shipping 1.1 million tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan. This shipment will pave the way for operationalisation of the Chabahar port as a reliable, alternative and healthy connectivity for Afghanistan and will boost trade and commerce between the three countries. It will provide new opportunities for trade and transit from and to Afghanistan and wider the region.¹⁰ India removed basic custom duties for all Afghan products during the year 2011 [except alcohol and tobacco products]. Since 2001, near about 100 Indian companies have been investing in Afghanistan.¹¹ The Chabahar port in Iran would be available for Afghanistan to trade with India and the rest of the world. This would boost Afghanistan export a Public-Private Organisation of Indian iron ore mining and steel companies (AFISCO) led by Steel Authority of India. Moreover, The TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) Project is considered as an important initiative of these four countries to connect energy rich Central Asia with energy starved South Asia. From India's perspective, TAPI Project will provide an alternative supply source of gas with dependable reserves leading to enhanced energy security. It will further diversify the fuel basket to the benefit of Indian economy as it would be used mainly in power, fertilizer and city gas sectors.

Undermine Pakistan's Influence:

Both India and Afghanistan can't ignore the long shadow of Pakistan in their relationship. Pakistan and India see each other as neighbours fraying, first for 'area of influence' and second to minimise



the influence of each other in Afghanistan. As Indo-Pak relations is characterised by what John J. Mearsheimer in his one of the realist principles calls 'states cannot be certain about others intentions'¹². After the fall of Taliban, Pakistan in order to keep India away from security activities exerted its influence on the USA has made India further suspicious about Pakistan intentions. India could achieve at least three goals to minimize or balance Pakistan's role in Afghanistan: establishment of stable and peaceful Afghanistan that is vital for India's national interest both strategic and commercial; Secondly, a peaceful, stable, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan with low level of radicalisation would be difficult for Pakistan to recruit Mujahedeen; Lastly, India's land access to resource rich Central Asia via Iran and Afghanistan. Today's Afghanistan Government which is composed of elements from Northern Afghanistan. For the southern part, it is possible that the Afghanistan government may initiate negotiations with moderate elements among the Taliban or with Pashtun tribal leaders to make itself more inclusive. To take advantage of these political compulsions, Pakistan would attempt and undermine all attempts at reconciliation talks by influencing the FATA and KPK based terror groups¹³. In order to counter Pakistan, India should dominate the political landscape of Afghanistan to ensure continued peace and stability. India's security interests in Afghanistan revolve around denying any political, military regime backed by Pakistan, Taliban or any other fundamentalist groups. India wanted to maintain good relations with Afghanistan with a purpose to keep an eye on Pakistan and to monitor activities in Pakistan. Since from very long time Pakistan tried to influence Afghanistan but failed to do so, on contrary, Kabul always welcomed India more than Islamabad. After the 9/11 attack the US campaign of war against terrorism provided India an opportunity to isolate Pakistan and to persuade the international community to declare Pakistan a "terrorist state". For the US military operations in Afghanistan India immediately offered full co-operation and air-base facilities and waged a campaign against Pakistan. In a statement on 16 September 2001, L. K. Advani, the Indian Home Minister said, "The world cannot disregard the fact that over a decade, Pakistan and now Taliban have been promoting terrorism. They have been giving refuge and asylum to all those indulging in terrorist violence".¹⁴

Containing Chinese influence in the Region:

India itself a developing country is providing a large amount of aid to Afghanistan. Behind its aid there are many political reasons. For making their places in the territory all major regional actors are using their different ways and means; India is trying to do this by involving itself into Afghanistan. For dominance in the region, there is battle going on between India and China. India's strengthening efforts in Afghanistan make it prominent in region and to limit China's (an emerging superpower) influence in the region. In order to utilize unexploited resources of Afghanistan, China is growing its influence in Afghanistan. To counter the influence of China in the region, India is providing assistance in many projects of reconstruction in Afghanistan. The launch of —Operation Enduring Freedom by US after 9/11 attacks, provided India an opportunity to pursue its foreign policy goals of attaining hegemonic position in the region. The \$ 330 million pales of China's contribution to Afghanistan in comparison to its status as an economic powerhouse. China is likely to intensify its commercial and economic initiatives in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan. India would mitigate China's potential rise as a



major trading partner for Afghanistan and to restrict China's inroads into the mining and construction sectors¹⁵.

Project itself as a dominant power in South Asia:

India's land mass constitutes half the region and is the largest economy and twice the population of all other countries in the region. It is generally seen as hegemonic and does not enjoy friendly relations with its neighbours. But right from the beginning, India enjoyed a good relations with Afghanistan with whom it does not share a border. With the support of Afghanistan, India has improved its relations with Central Asian States but it nevertheless seen as hegemonic in the region. India's desire to carve out itself a larger role in regional affairs, keeping parity with its rising economic and military profile adopted a strategic policy towards Afghanistan. India is a rising global power and it is adapting its foreign policy to meet the international challenges of the twenty first century and to increase its global influence and status. The Strategic Partnership Agreement of 2011 between India and Afghanistan signified India's willingness to take responsibility for ensuring stability around the periphery¹⁶.

Elimination of anti-Indian Terrorism:

Pakistan always using its terror things to influence over countries it considers adversarial to its interests. In that way, Pakistan has always launched anti- India terror attacks on Indian soil and on India's Interests in Afghanistan. But Pakistan usually denies these allegations when presented with evidence of its involvement in the terror attacks. The attacks on the Indian embassy in Afghanistan and 26/11 Mumbai attacks have strengthened the Indian resolve to prevent further attacks by military means if necessary. The goal of India is to prevent Afghanistan from being used as a hub for Pakistani-supported extremists to launch terrorist attacks against India and its diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (UN) stated in July 2008 that "security within Afghanistan, and coordinated efforts to stop terrorists from operating with impunity beyond Afghanistan's borders must be the paramount priority of our collective efforts in Afghanistan." ¹⁷ From the Indian point of view, it is important to check the acceleration of militant Islamist ideas in Afghanistan and stop the chances of the return of the Taliban which Islamabad exploited in spawning troubles in Kashmir.

5. U. S. New Afghanistan Policy and Role of India

The American president Donald Trump has recently approved a new policy to tackle with Taliban in Afghanistan. In his new policy the president made a firm decision to keep US troops committed in Afghanistan. This decision has pleased Kabul, but at the same time has caused exasperation in Islamabad.¹⁸ So far as India is concerned, president Donald Trump showered praises on the Positive Changes being brought by India to that war ravaged nation. India is trying to improve the social sphere coupled with improvements in the governance and democracy building of Afghanistan, with the government grant. In fact by his speech it is also being speculated that he would like India to take on a greater role in Afghanistan as Pakistan has betrayed his trust.¹⁹ India pledged to expand development and medical assistance for the strife-torn nation Afghanistan, but at the same time ruled out deploying troops in Afghanistan. Recently in September, 2017, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in response to questions on the issue of deploying



Indian troops in Afghanistan, at a press conference she addressed along with her U. S. counterpart James Mattis, that, "We have made it very clear that there shall not be boots from India on the ground". India has already extended \$3 billion aid to Afghanistan, provides security assistance in the form of training and has also supplied some utility and attack helicopters. By this it becomes clear that India has always been in a forefront to assist Afghanistan in every possible way.

6. Conclusions

After the fall of Taliban in 2001, India's supporting role and interests in Afghanistan have been shaped by many factors. India sought a stable and democratic Afghanistan in order to counter Pakistani influence there as a part of its effort to arrest the problems of anti-Indian terrorism and weaken insurgency in Kashmir. However, India's interest in Afghanistan went beyond reducing Pakistani influence there to include protection and promotion of its own trade and energy interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia which meant undercutting the influence of other major powers too. India's initiative to unite the interests of regional stakeholders through connectivity, transit and road networks would go a long way in protecting Indian interests in Afghanistan. This will enable India to play a greater role in shaping the future of Afghanistan as a democratic, multi-ethnic and plural country. India needs to quit the fence and get on with the task of proving to the world that it has indeed arrived—and that it is quite capable of assuming regional roles and resolving issues in its backyard.

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